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BARBARA LASLETT OF THE SEATTLE LABOR CHORUS

INTERVIEWEE: BARBARA LASLETT

INTERVIEWERS: CINDY COLE

SUBJECTS: Rye, New York; Great Depression; music; ILGWU; being Jewish; feminism; Willowemoc interracial summer camp in upstate New York; socialists; leftists; political activism; University of Chicago; Folklore Society; UCLA; Vietnam War; University of Minnesota; academic journal *Signs*; Henry Wallace.

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[00:00:00] **CINDY COLE:** This is an interview with Barbara Laslett for the Seattle Labor Chorus Oral History Project. We are doing this in Seattle, Washington, on January 28, 2015. Cindy Cole is the interviewer.

Barbara, can you talk about when and where you were born and a little bit about your family life?

[00:00:34] **BARBARA LASLETT:** I was born in Rye, New York, in Westchester County. My father and my mother and brother, we all lived there. My father had a grocery store, something that went bankrupt.

I was born in 1933, so economic conditions were not the greatest at that time, although there is a story there, which is that one day, Amelia Earhart went into the store to get some groceries. I was a newborn, so she picked me up and held me. I've been using that to think I had something to do with her, but it was silly.

I had a brother, who was five years older than I. It undoubtedly had an effect on some of the other things we'll talk about in that he was very much involved with music, mostly classical and opera, but also symphonic and so on. But music was essential to his life.

Can I have a little bit more specific question?

[00:02:21] **CINDY:** What about your father and your mother?

[00:02:25] **BARBARA:** My father was an immigrant. He had been born and brought up in Eastern Europe. He came here to this country. I can't frankly remember if it was just at the beginning of the First World War or when the First World War was over.

I'll tell you why I don't know more, because it also tells you something about my family life. My mother took great pride in the fact that she was a natural born American. She felt she had married down by marrying an immigrant. The relationship between my mother and my father was very, very hostile. Very poor.

I was curious as a kid. What did you do to my father? And my mother wouldn't let him tell any stories about it. All I know about their relationship is they didn't like each other very much, so it wasn't a happy time for my brother or myself, but that gives you a little sense of the background.

We are Jewish. We are. There are very few of us still alive. My brother is dead. Some of the significant extended family, almost all of them are dead. It's not like I can get either very much information of very much whatever.

[00:04:30] **CINDY:** Sure, sure. When you were 13, there were some things that happened that affected the rest of your life. Could you talk about that time?

[00:04:39] **BARBARA:** With great pleasure. The most important man in my life when I was 13 was my uncle, Joe, who was also an immigrant. He'd had to go to Europe to be a doctor, to do his medical training. He had to go to Europe because there were limits to how many Jews would be accepted into medical school.

I read a lot of historical stuff on this because I was interested, both in my interest for women and feminism, but obviously, in my own family as well.

I'm not sure if I'm going off track or whatever.

[00:05:46] **CINDY:** You're fine. Just talk a little more about your Uncle Joe.

[00:05:49] **BARBARA:** Oh, he was wonderful. I adored him and he adored me. The family was Joe, and his brother, Max, and his brother, Paul, who as an adult was a union organizer for the ILGWU. And Esther, the one girl in the family.

I've lost track.

[00:06:29] **CINDY:** You were talking about your Uncle Joe, and also the union connection.

[00:06:34] **BARBARA:** And he was a socialist. He grew up in Vienna and there were certainly plenty of socialists there at the time. He was very much involved politically with what was going on, all on the left.

As for my immediate family, when I was young, my parents were Democrats, no question, but they weren't involved in politics, and they didn't really—they read—I can't quite remember the newspaper that they read, but it was a left-wing newspaper, or at least a progressive newspaper.

What happened when I was 13—from the early words I said you might not be surprised to know that my early life as a child was not a necessarily happy one. Joe found an ad in the Sunday New York Times of one Sunday or another. There was an advertisement for a summer camp in upstate New York. It was to be an interracial summer camp.

This was the summer of the Henry Wallace campaign for the presidency. He managed to convince my parents that I should be sent there. Now, they did not have much money. I'm convinced he paid for it. And there are a couple of other things like that in our lives as well where he supported us because my parents—they were not highly educated and we were not wealthy in any respect. But he convinced my parents, because it was thought that it had to be respectable if it was in the New York Times.

I wish I could remember the year—I've forgotten—but that was the incredible, incredible thing that changed my life, going to this place, not only because it meant I could get away from my family and all of the tensions and so on. When I went out of town to college many years later, a part of the reason was because I wanted to get the hell away from my family. It was not a happy place to be.

Back to camp. Willowemoc in Roscoe, New York. That's a small town in upstate New York. It was owned and run by a man named Dr. Thomas. I don't remember anything more than that. He was African American and a doctor.

It was just an incredible experience. I loved it. I could still go back and recount various things. I was in a tent with about five, six girls. It was a tent with a wooden floor, and there were single beds in there. The counselor—this tells you the impact—her name was Leona, Leora, something like that. Her boyfriend's name was Tom. He also was a counselor in the camp.

The people there were just incredible leftists. It was a transformative experience for me. And the fact that there were African Americans as well as Caucasian Americans just had a huge impact. I don't recall Latinos or Asians. Maybe it was just that I wasn't close to them.

But it was the most fantastic, fantastic [experience] , and I went for four or five years. The last year, I was a junior counselor.

[00:12:16] **CINDY:** Did that also have a musical impact on you?

[00:12:20] **BARBARA:** Oh, yes, yes. There was a guy named Larry Pallas—it's funny the things you remember—and he was a folksinger, and he was also a caller for square dancing. In fact, he came, with my invitation, to my 16th birthday party, which was all square dancing. There are many stories to tell, but not for this interview. I'm not trying to be quiet about them, but if you're interested in something I'm not [saying] , you'll say.

As I say, I went for five years. I remember we went down someplace just at the beginning of Washington Heights in Manhattan to get the bus to go up to Roscoe, New York. I remember this elderly man. He was taking down names as you got up onto the bus, and he said, "You're Barbara Talber, aren't you?" I said, "Yes, except my name is Bobbie." I took another name because this whole issue of separating from my family, from my parents, there was a signature put on it by my taking a name for myself.

It was just a wonderful experience in many, many ways, but the music was central. And the fact that this was a time when there was an electoral process going on—and it was funny because—virtually all of the counselors were very left-wing, not that I really knew what that meant at the time. They were required not to wear a Wallace for President button. Subsequently, in thinking about it, you’ve got this Dr. Thomas, the head of the camp, who didn’t let these counselors wear these election buttons.

I was there, as I said, for several years, but I’m thinking of the first year that made it such a great, transformative experience for me. I love talking about this. I hope I’m not going on too much.

[00:15:54] **CINDY:** It’s fine. It was an experience that you had there that really touched you.

[00:15:59] **BARBARA:** Absolutely. It transformed me. I had been involved in some political activity before I went up there, but it didn’t have to do with race. I became incredibly conscious of the whole set of racial issues. It transformed my life. There’s more to say, but it’s not necessarily relevant.

[00:16:35] **CINDY:** So, with the folk music, did you then take up music at that time?

[00:16:41] **BARBARA:** I tried. I won’t go into all the details because it’s got some family issues involved. One thing that I will say is that my elderly great aunts—not all of them but some of them—thought it was terrible that I was going to this camp and I was living in the same tents as Black people. So, not everybody in the family was progressive, especially on racial issues.

[00:17:22] **CINDY:** So, there was some opposition, and yet, for you, it was a wonderful experience.

[00:17:32] **BARBARA:** Absolutely.

[00:17:33] **CINDY:** It opened your eyes.

[00:17:34] **BARBARA:** Right, but Joe was such a supporter. Although he was not the eldest son in the family, or the eldest child in the family, he was the head of the family. My grandfather was an Orthodox Jew and a widower. A very nice man, but I wasn’t allowed to have much contact with him because of this immigrant/non-immigrant issue.

[00:18:21] **CINDY:** Let’s go on. You did go away to college, and I just wondered if you wanted to talk a little bit about your memories of your college years.

[00:18:41] **BARBARA:** Sure. I loved it! I had two interests. One was politics and history and social science and so on, and the other one was art. My parents couldn’t pay for an expensive college or university, but I ended up going to the University of Chicago. I did reasonably well on the entrance exams. Again, it was the fact that I could get the hell away from my family, my parents in particular.

I went to Chicago. The person who was my roommate lives here in Bellevue. I got drunk the first night I was there. Thought it was great. She didn’t because I vomited on her clothes. [laughing]

[00:19:46] **CINDY:** What did you study there?

[00:19:47] **BARBARA:** Social science. Chicago then had this special program in which you started out with one set of classes, and then you would move along in a program. It was called the Hutchins Program—Robert M. Hutchins. He was a famous educator and a philosopher of education at the time. It was all based on the Great Books.

Oh, yes, there were all of the folk musicians that I got involved with. Some years later, I was head of the Folklore Society at the University of Chicago. I organized things, like concerts, one of which Pete Seeger was at, another one which Big Bill Broonzy was at. I was involved with all of the stuff that I had come to love.

Politics was always part of it—leftist politics, progressive politics.

[00:21:14] **CINDY:** Do you remember what year you graduated?

[00:21:20] **BARBARA:** I graduated twice because I graduated about 50—I can't remember. I could go find my diploma, but you don't need that—1952 or something like that. But I hadn't finished the whole program. This was a Great Books program with lots of special teaching techniques, mainly based on discussion.

[00:22:03] **CINDY:** Did you get your master's there also?

[00:22:09] **BARBARA:** I got my master's and my PhD there. But 1952 was the first graduation. The second one was 54 or 55 because I hadn't finished all the courses I was supposed to have finished.

Also, I found out, sitting up in the dorms with the girls talking about assignments we had—I don't mean to boast, but when we got back papers that we had written for these assignments, this wonderful, wonderful professor said, "Well, you didn't do this right, you didn't do this right." He was talking to the class. "You didn't do this right, that right."

He said, "In fact, there was only one paper here that really satisfied what was supposed to be done in this assignment, and the name is Barbara Talber." I just about fell over.

[00:23:29] **CINDY:** You did well.

[00:23:31] **BARBARA:** I did well, even though I'd had to take writing classes because my writing capacity was not very good.

[00:23:39] **CINDY:** Would you like to talk about your married life at all? Didn't you meet your husband during these times?

[00:23:48] **BARBARA:** No, later, but at the University of Chicago. He's English. He'd come to the U.S. to do research for his thesis. He was a student at the University of Oxford, but he was involved in American labor history. That's why he'd come to this country. That was the research that he was doing for his dissertation or for what they call at Oxford, his D.Phil.

We met. I won't go into the details. We met and fell in love. [laughing] I was about to say he invited me to marry him. That's absolutely the wrong language. But in any case, he asked me to marry him.

As I think I must have said earlier, I was and am Jewish. His father was a Baptist minister in Oxford. Now, not like a Southern Baptist, but like a Rockefeller kind of Baptist, a Northern Baptist. But nevertheless, there was some sense of—my brother had married a Catholic girl from France and I won't even go into the story. It's not relevant for me, although I'm still in touch with that part of the family. John Laslett was my dead husband's name.

[00:25:51] **CINDY:** Did he then go back to Oxford to finish his PhD and you went with him?

[00:25:56] **BARBARA:** Yes. Of course, we were married by then.

[00:26:00] **CINDY:** What was it like living in Oxford?

[00:26:08] **BARBARA:** His parents were very poor, too. There wasn't a lot of money in his family and I didn't have much.

I'm getting stuck because there are lots of things that are important to me but really don't have much to do with what we're talking about.

[00:26:34] **CINDY:** Okay.

[00:26:35] **BARBARA:** But I stayed active in the Folklore Society. As I said, I was the head of it for some time. I did organize these concerts and blah blah blah. So, I kept my connection with political music, folk music, ethnic music and so on.

[00:27:06] **CINDY:** You had two children, Michael and Sarah. How was it raising them? Did you have a certain philosophy about raising them?

[00:27:14] **BARBARA:** I don't think so. John, their father, was also a leftist, and I had in my high school years become a leftist. It wasn't difficult. Michael started guitar relatively quickly. Sarah did singing lessons. They are very talented, and they are really committed politically, and the work they do now as adults is quite exemplary.

Michael sings all the time and Sarah does as well, and she's director of the Labor Studies Center at South Seattle Community College.

[00:28:24] **CINDY:** And Michael works for the SEIU.

[00:28:33] **BARBARA:** Right. He's always been working for a union.

[00:28:35] **CINDY:** That was just the way they were brought up in your household, with lots of music.

[00:28:44] **BARBARA:** Exactly. I had gotten in love with the folk music, and a lot of it was being—it was during the folk whatever it's called, when Pete Seeger and the Weavers and so on, and Joanie Mitchell and Bob [Dylan]. So, it was on in the house all the time.

And feminist music was just emerging. When Pete Seeger died and there was this—when we all met to just be able to say what we wanted, I told—now I can't even remember the story, but there was a story about things I said about Holly Near and Holly Near's music, which I thought was wonderful.

But Michael—we used to sing in the car, and one day Michael said to me, “Mom, are all men bad?” I said that no, I didn't think so. In fact, Holly Near doesn't think so. I told this story—no, I didn't tell it at the Pete Seeger gathering.

[00:30:13] **CINDY:** That's a neat story. Would you like to talk about your academic appointments at the University of Southern California, and your involvement in feminism?

[00:30:27] **BARBARA:** That's another whole thing because I didn't have an easy time getting jobs. I was a feminist. Also, I was assigned—one of my first jobs was at UCLA, and the only reason I got a job there was because the person who taught Sociology of the Family was ill and was very close to retirement. And I was a woman, so therefore, I must know about family, and I started teaching Sociology of the Family.

Then the whole Vietnam War thing, and there was a lot of activity going on at the UCLA campus, and not just UCLA.

I think I'm beginning to run out of my memory, so why don't you ask me something specific?

[00:31:43] **CINDY:** Sure. Were you able to teach any feminist classes?

[00:31:52] **BARBARA:** Eventually. I was the one in the Sociology Department—this was during the Tet Offensive, I think that was the name of it—and I had the biggest project for people in my classes to do. Since there was a huge war going on in the other part of the world, and I just wasn't going to go on and teach it at a very—

[00:32:34] **CINDY:** Not bringing it up.

[00:32:36] **BARBARA:** Exactly. But at the time, there was also the feminist movement that was beginning to develop, and that certainly appealed to me. In fact, there were some complaints about me because I used too much of that material. It never was a problem, but I did get a reputation as a feminist, and when I lost my job, it was not so easy to find another one, but I did. I forgot where the next one was. I could check my files, but I don't think it's necessary.

[00:33:28] **CINDY:** Were you able to write any articles? Did you get anything published?

[00:33:33] **BARBARA:** Oh, yes. And a lot of it was about women, family, feminism.

[00:33:46] **CINDY:** Would you relate something about your move to the University of Minnesota?

[00:33:54] **BARBARA:** First, the thing that came in between, it was not only the birth of two children . . . I've lost my train of thought.

[00:34:11] **CINDY:** If you want to, just talk about the fact that you did move to the University of Minnesota. Did you teach there?

[00:34:17] **BARBARA:** Oh, yes, for a long time. But feminism and academic feminism was high up in my life and in what was going on in parts of universities all over the country. I became the editor, among other things, with one other co-editor of an academic journal called *Signs*, which was the premier academic feminist journal in the country, published by the University of Chicago Press, a very prestigious thing.

I was involved in working with other women to develop feminist groups—study groups and a whole variety of things, and some activism. Not everything was intellectual.

It's funny how things are getting mushy for me in my mind.

[00:35:39] **CINDY:** I think you're getting tired, too.

[00:35:42] **BARBARA:** Yes, I am.

[00:35:43] **CINDY:** How did you end up in Seattle, Washington?

[00:35:49] **BARBARA:** My children were living here. I had a job at USC. After leaving wherever the hell I was—oh, Chicago—and I was married. We moved to LA. John had gotten a job at UCLA and I got several jobs in that area.

I didn't want to live in the same city he was living in anymore, and I got an offer from Minnesota. Because I had been doing historical research. I was publishing historical work, usually on women and family.

Is that enough? I could give you a copy of my c.v. if you'd like.

[00:36:55] **CINDY:** Great. Very nice, and thank you so much for taking the time.

[00:37:00] **BARBARA:** It's been my pleasure.